

Sermon for 27th March 2022 – Year C – Lent 4 – Mothering Sunday

Preached at St Michael, Smarden, and All Saints, Biddenden

Colossians 3:12-17; John 19:25b-27

With the possible exception of trying to explain the nature of the Trinity on Trinity Sunday, Mothering Sunday is perhaps the most difficult of all sermons for a new parish priest, just as it is a very difficult day for a significant proportion of any congregation.

I've no doubt that there will be some sitting here for whom Mothering Sunday (or Mother's Day as the secular world knows it) is full of sorrow and sadness. There will be some who have lost children or experienced miscarriage, many who have lost mothers, some whose relationship with their mother is strained or broken, some whose relationship with their child is strained or broken, or who feel unwanted and unneeded by their grown-up family. A few of us will be heartbroken because for one reason or another we never had the children we longed for. I am myself among that number. There will be single parents, who struggled to raise a family in a society and church that judged and abandoned them. And those who have no children (whether they chose it or not) may feel excluded and less honoured than those who have.

Did you know that the two women who invented Mother's Day never had any children of their own? Anna Jarvis organised the first in America in 1908 after the death of her own mother. Inspired by this but wary of importing American culture, Constance Adelaide Smith campaigned in Britain in 1914 for the return of the medieval tradition of Mothering Sunday where Christians would make a pilgrimage to their 'mother church', which might be the local cathedral, or the place where they were baptised. For those who lived away from their families,

such as those in service or live-in apprentices, this was a rare opportunity to visit their parents and bring them gifts.

And yet these festivals were never universally joyful even in their medieval incarnation. Parishes apparently sometimes got into brawls over who should go first in the procession! In America, Anna Jarvis was so distraught by the commercialisation of Mother's Day that she called for its abandonment in 1943, declaring that "A printed card means nothing except you are too lazy to write to the woman who has done more for you than anyone in the world". Ouch. Commercialism won though, because five years later the greetings card companies honoured her by paying for her funeral.

So, the preacher must acknowledge all this history, this suffering and regret, all this yearning and longing and loss that remains hidden and unknown to our friends, sometimes even to our families, and almost certainly to the church. The preacher must find the right words to say, to comfort and console, while also celebrating the joy that parenthood can bring, the welcome and love and acceptance and gratitude that families are able to offer one another, whether we are families of blood or chosen families of friendship or faith.

The lectionary gives us two alternatives for the gospel reading on Mothering Sunday. Either we return to the presentation of Jesus in the Temple at the start of his life (when Mary is told by Simeon that Jesus is destined to save many people, but a sword will pierce Mary's heart), or, as we have just heard, we are transported directly into the heart of parental suffering, as Mary sees her son Jesus crucified and dying, while being utterly powerless to do anything to save or protect him.

Mary – the Church's perfect icon of motherhood. Mary who said yes to God when so many had said no. Mary whom the Orthodox call 'Theotokos' meaning literally 'mother of God'. Mary who accepts shame, rejection, and discomfort, just to reach to the point of giving birth. Mary who must become an asylum

seeker in Egypt to escape king Herod's wrath. Mary who triggers the first of Jesus' miracles at the wedding at Cana by refusing to take a no from her divine Son. Mary whom Jesus later apparently ignores, telling his followers that *his* family are those who do the will of God, not those related by blood. Mary who is still there nevertheless at the Cross, long after Joseph has passed away, willing to endure the suffering of watching her son die, when so many of Jesus' friends and disciples and brothers and sisters were nowhere to be seen.

Did Mary receive comfort and consolation for her broken heart? Well, Mary's sister was there with her. Yes, intriguingly, Jesus had an aunt. Speaking as an aunt myself, I wonder what *that* relationship was like. And of course the unnamed 'beloved disciple' was also at the cross, who in a way also represents *us*, so that when Jesus says to him "Here is your mother", she becomes – as the Catholics strongly believe - a mother to us all.

And so, for Mary there is a transition from being a mother by blood to Jesus, to being a mother to the whole family of believers. And then, following Jesus' Way, the family of Abraham, the Jewish faith, expands to include the new Christians of Greek and Roman culture, and beyond that, even right to our own English shores.

Even so, the pain and suffering of being part of a family continues. For the early Christians there are persecutions, disagreements, schisms, and martyrdoms. Paul the Apostle falls out with just about everyone, including people from the churches he has founded. And yet he asks in today's letter to the Colossian church for Christians to clothe ourselves in compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience. Bear with one another, he says, and forgive each other. Above all, clothe yourselves with love which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts. And be thankful.

In the midst of the brutality of his time, Paul is describing God's model for a community or family of love.

This is the point of Church – to be a family of vulnerability and authenticity that acknowledges and shares in one another’s suffering – to which not a one of us are strangers – and to console one another in our pain; to weep with those who weep, and mourn with those who mourn, and, of course, rejoice with those who rejoice. And on Mother’s Day, surely there will be some of us who have reason to do all of these at once.

Too often I think there is a temptation for churches to become places of stiff-upper lips, of hidden distress, where you have to pretend to be fine when someone asks you how you are. But Mother Church must not be like that. Mother church must be somewhere we can look each other in the face, speak of our afflictions, and know that we will find compassion and consolation. Mother church must be a school of compassion and love, not of conformity and pretence.

Our pews face forward, appropriately designed to direct our attention towards God, but oh how I wish they faced inward at an angle so that we could really see God’s compassionate face in one another. Today, I believe we are all mothers, one to another, sent by God’s love to console and be consoled. Today, we clothe ourselves with love which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And today, we let the peace of Christ rule in our hearts. And are thankful.